

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

YELLOW RAT SNAKE

One of the services that I enjoy providing for our community is rescuing and relocating snakes. I started doing this mainly because I hated to hear that people were killing snakes that they found around (or inside) their homes, or calling pest-control companies to kill them. After all, snakes perform an important ecological role as predators on rodents, lizards, insects and other prey (depending on the species of snake) and they deserve to live in the wild as much as any other animals. But there's another reason I perform this free service. Since childhood I've found snakes to be fascinating, and I've always enjoyed finding and

photographing them and educating people about the importance of conserving them.

One of the snakes that turns up very often inside our buildings is the Yellow Rat Snake. I've been called to remove these big, beautiful reptiles from Pizza Places, Plant Nurseries, garages, and the roofs of homes. Rat snakes are excellent climbers. Earlier this summer I saw a 6-foot-long individual climbing straight up the trunk of a big oak along the sidewalk at Victoria Gardens' main entrance gate. Removing one of these powerful constrictors from a building usually requires the aid of a ladder, and the snake almost always coils part of its body around the rafters or other objects to resist being caught, making the task even more difficult and exciting.

In central Florida, the Yellow Rat Snake is usually yellow with 4 dark stripes running down the length of its body. Down in the Everglades it may be vivid orange, while in the Carolinas it's

a darker olive-green. And in the northeastern states it's almost solid black! These are all geographic color variations of the same species, now collectively known as the Eastern Rat Snake. It's one of our country's biggest snakes, reaching a length of 7 1/2 feet. Young rat snakes eat anole lizards and frogs while adults prefer rats, mice, small rabbits, and birds, which they kill by constriction before swallowing them whole. To humans, this snake is harmless, although handling one without gloves may result in lacerations from its sharp teeth. (Call me at 386-218-4018 to remove a snake).